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Why do anarchists abstain from elections?

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“The following is a slightly edited version of a talk given to a panel hosted by Socialist Unity and Geelong Anarchist Communists in March, 2022. The topic of the panel was ‘should socialists participate in elections,’ however the idea was first posited as to discuss why anarchists do not run in elections. As such the article attempts to cover both bases.”

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Contents

Debating a vision of socialism	5
Why abstention?	7
How do we fight instead?	11
Victorian Socialists? Not for us.	14

working class has no parliament but the street, the factory, and the workplace. They have no other path than social revolution.”

Debating a vision of socialism

When addressing a particular debate in politics, I think it's important to understand how an issue and the common positions around it developed. As such, I want to demonstrate the rationale of why anarchists refuse to participate in bourgeois elections.

Before I do, I should make a very basic statement about anarchism. Anarchism is a branch of socialism. It aims for the revolutionary overthrow of bourgeois society and its defining features are direct action, federalism, internationalism and parliamentary abstention. Anarchist strategy has been overwhelmingly focused on mass self-directed working class activity. Usually this means building fighting unions, but in different contexts has employed various forms as the means by which workers can make revolution.

Throughout anarchist history, mass organisation has often been coupled with a specific political organisation committed to anarchism, but it has not been seen as the role of the specific organisation itself to *make* nor to dictate the forms of the revolution.

So to address how and why anarchists hold the abstentionist position; As comrades may know, anarchism developed out of the revolutionary collectivist and federalist wing of the first International. At the Basle Congress in 1869 the so-called 'revolutionary collectivists' first began to articulate a programme for achieving and managing the future society. Labour councils were to manage working class affairs, directing strikes and generalising struggle against the bosses and the state until such a point that workers could seize control of society. These labour councils, based on both industry and community, would form 'dual bodies of production and consumption', replacing the bourgeois state.

It's important to note this vision was developed in opposition to certain aspects of the ideas of Marx and the so-called

‘State socialists.’ The Communist Manifesto was fairly well circulated everywhere in Europe⁽¹⁾ except France by this time, and many revolutionaries took serious issue with the lines in it about the *concentration of production into the hands of the state*. The state of course, being an institution of class domination. The other line the collectivists took issue with was the idea of ‘*winning the battle of democracy*’, which was interpreted to mean conquering the capitalist state by electoral means.

While few people today maintain the illusion that socialism can be achieved peacefully, it was not so obvious at the birth of the movement. These early revolutionaries thought following the advice of Marx and Engels would lead to putting the revolution on hold indefinitely. Or to the complete state domination of all social life. Essentially, state capitalism. If this was a fair interpretation of the ideas of Marx and Engels is up for debate, but nonetheless, the debates around these ideas helped shape the split in the First International.

In contrast to the slow electoral capture of the state, the collectivist current, which eventually became the anarchists, believed the most important task was the building of independent proletarian institutions. As mentioned before, these autonomous working class organisations were to form the basis of the new society. They were not intended to be institutions which would piecemeal take over capitalism by turning companies into co-ops or establishing mutual aid organisations. Rather, by developing the autonomy of the working class through a process of consistent conflict with capitalists and the state, the working class would realise the nature of its opposition to capitalism and then overthrow the system. The thesis was also that these institutions may serve as the grounds not only for the current struggle, but also for organisational basis of the new society. This of course was not a given conclusion. It is, after all, immensely difficult to

⁽¹⁾ Including in Russia, where it was translated by Bakunin.

of social democratic parties the world over. It is barely more radical than the Greens, and certainly less relevant. If socialists are serious about overthrowing capitalism, this is what they should be actively arguing for, rather than covering it up with palatable reformist projects.

As such many excellent activists are spending their time extolling the virtues of a party and a reformist programme that cannot be won. They are building an electoral project rather than building social and labour movements or revolutionary organisations. Many socialist comrades will not accept the limitations and contradictions of participating in the union bureaucracy, yet they compete for a role in the bourgeois state.

We are less interested in arguments for donkey votes and individual abstention than what is required to build class power and what breaks the limiting logic of parliamentary socialism. All socialists know that politically sharp revolutionary organisations are a requirement of the class struggle. This is what our anarchist-communist groups are attempting to build, this is what we encourage other socialist comrades to continue with. Without the distraction of electoralism.

Political organisation outside parliament, an independent and fighting rank and file labour movement. These are the things we need to be building in the here and now, preparing the way for a revolutionary workers movement. Opportunities to build class power exist, from Library strikes in Geelong to the Nurses and Teachers strikes in NSW, to the campaigns of South Queensland Union of Renters. Campaigns to rebuild May Day and the Climate Strikes similarly break the logic of parliamentary action.

All the things socialists may expect to achieve from elections; a soapbox for their politics, the ability to make small legal reforms, can be achieved through means that do not require we sacrifice workers’ politics in the bourgeois halls of power.

I will be indulgent and finish with a quote from the famous anarcho-syndicalist revolutionary Buenaventura Durruti; “*the*

Victorian Socialists? Not for us.

Our left is dominated by bureaucratic unions, the ALP and the Greens. There is extremely marginal space for Socialist electoral activity. What success there has been for generations has been incredibly negligible. Year after year of such results, tens of thousands of dollars and hours have been invested in achieving very little.

At its height, even the vastly larger Communist Party only managed to have a few people elected, and yet the only major changes they influenced were won through building a direct action labour movement.

Look at what happened to the Democratic Socialist Perspective when it dissolved into Socialist Alliance. An unmitigated disaster. From the largest socialist group on the left to a small party of vaguely defined anti-capitalism. Even the politics of Socialist Alternative have shifted since embarking upon the Victorian Socialists project. They dropped their union conference, the messaging around elections is contradictory. The saving grace for the revolutionary politics of our Trotskyist cousins is the lack of success of Victorian Socialists.

Victorian Socialists are not an appropriate body for revolutionary anti-capitalist politics. As Jerome Small recently wrote in Red Flag “you don’t have to be a revolutionary in order to support Victorian Socialists.” Which is fair enough, but one wonders why revolutionaries are building a non-revolutionary party.

Victorian Socialists Federal Election manifesto only mentions capitalism three times, and none of these are paired with the suggestion of overthrowing the system, only with reforming its contradictions. There is no mention of revolution. Surely this should be the minimum task of a revolutionary socialist organisation in parliament, but it falls even at this first hurdle.

What the VS programme calls for is increased taxes on the rich and the nationalisation of essential services. This is typical

maintain the combative nature of a proletarian organisation without it either being smashed or integrated into managing capitalism. Autonomy from the institutions of the state was therefore a key aspect of maintaining revolutionary intent.

Over time, the fears of the anarchists were confirmed. Many early socialist parties slowly jettisoned their vision of a new society as they grew in popularity, won more votes and seats in parliaments, and were slowly integrated into running bourgeois states.

As Rudolf Rocker put it, *‘Participation in the politics of the bourgeois states has not brought the labour movement a hairs’ breadth closer to Socialism, but, thanks to this method, Socialism has almost been completely crushed and condemned to insignificance.’*

Why abstention?

The short detour through history presented here was to illustrate these debates from which the anarchists’ abstentionist position developed. But there is more to the analysis than a vision of labour councils running society. Sometimes people assume that it comes from an abstract, individualist moralism regarding not telling other people what to do, or some politics of purity. These are misconceptions.

Sometimes people also think that anarchists’ rejection of electoral politics translates into such absurd positions as refusing to vote within their own collectives, in unions or other working class bodies, and are against having any kind of representative organisation. Again this is untrue, but instead of granting executive power to select individuals, anarchists believe that at least as far as working class organisations go, representation should be strictly mandated and delegates immediately recallable. For the record, historically, the vast majority of anarchist organisations have operated by majority vote.

The point I want to make ultimately, is that anarchists abstention from electoral politics is not based on abstractions, but instead is based on a very concrete assessment about the type of world we want, and what it takes to get there.

One key idea is what anarchists define as transformative practice (or praxis). That is, the building of the *subjective, revolutionary consciousness* that, along, with objective conditions, is required to make a revolution. In a society divided into classes, for workers consciousness of their position emerges from the contradictions of the *social relations of production*. That is, because the economic structures of society mean that workers and capitalists ultimately have opposite interests, struggles between classes are inevitable. The process of fighting in their own interests shapes the consciousness of workers, hopefully coming to realise the values of solidarity and collectivity that are required to overthrow capitalism and establish socialism.

Therefore, to anarchists, the type of action workers undertake in the class struggle plays a fundamental role in shaping the type of ideology that emerges in the fight for socialism. Which is why the connection between ends and means is vital, and why we can speak of anarchism as a methodology that links both the form, direct action and direct democracy, with the content, revolutionary socialist politics.

In parliamentary politics, workers are alienated from decision making processes. A representative in parliament has a number of years where they can make autonomous decisions, unaccountable to their electorate. They are more accountable to the bureaucracy of the state and to business pressures than their electorate. Their accountability to their party can of course, depend upon the structures of said party, but the party slowly becomes accountable to the state by its prolonged participation.

The need to maintain a position in parliament comes to define the role of even socialist parties. Increasing resources are dedicated to maintaining seats, and members in parliament

gle for canvassing, because sometimes that *feels* like you're really making a difference. But if you look at the big picture, the long term strategy is not guaranteed. Eventually, the means, elections, have become the ends.

In fact, given the power that capital holds over bourgeois electoral politics, the successes that parliamentary socialists manage to achieve are usually ways of channeling discontent into safe avenues. It's more useful for the bosses to include socialists in managing their state than have them outside, organising a strong opposition. Not only does building parliamentary politics not help the workers movement, it actively harms it.

Obviously, a common contention from other socialists is that the abstentionist position should be seen only as a tactic employed depending on material conditions, rather than it becoming a principle. So while abstention may be a defining feature of what actually makes an organisation or someone anarchist, this is only so because anarchists have determined abstention to be a strategy appropriate to capitalist relations in total!

Of course material conditions change, and other elements of our strategies and tactics, such as forms of political organisation, involvement in various social movements and unions, plans for insurrection etc shift accordingly. But the overall strategy of abstention, because it is so tied to the revolutionary end, does not change.

After all, communism exists as a potential based on the contradictions of capitalism. It does not slowly emerge from the institutions and forms of social organisation in bourgeois society. Capitalism must be smashed, our task is to lay the grounds for that radical break.

This is why the focal point for struggle remains the economic fighting bodies of workers. After all, although it is where workers are exploited, it is also where they are most powerful, where workers combine and overcome various sectional interests and prejudices, and where we can most profoundly disrupt the functionality of capital. In Australia today, the union movement is really very weak. But organised labour remains the basis of our strength, and it should be our priority to rebuild class autonomy and strength. But not through distractions with bourgeois campaigns. Parliament is after all, where the bourgeoisie settle their disputes, not workers.

The history of the working class proves that struggle outside of parliament is the most effective way to organise. The 8 hour day, the weekend, universal suffrage, the laundry list of achievements made by the Builders Labourers Federation. Even gay marriage was legalised by the Liberal Party, after decades of campaigns that refused to accept the logic of waiting to get the right progressives elected. No major reforms are ever won by getting people elected, they were won by combinations of independent social movements and direct action by workers. So we do not ignore the need for political reforms, we fight for them in a proletarian manner.

Unfortunately, the reality is that electoral campaigns are a distraction. Sometimes there are social movements which are building, fighting, and even winning. Then an election comes along, and politicians try to convince people the next step is to get them elected. Socialists are even sometimes won over to building campaigns for parties who don't even share their politics⁽²⁾. It's absurd people would waste their time building organisations that advocate politics they don't believe in.

The advocates of electoral parties try to convince us that this is how we can really make change. But it never comes, comrades instead become convinced to abandon direct strug-

⁽²⁾ Think of all the 'socialists' involved in the Greens over the years.

slowly build relationships with bourgeois politicians, parties and even capitalists. Essentially, electoralism conditions people and their organisations to a certain way of doing politics, where parliamentary needs detract from collective decision making and direct action.

So while participating in parliament means socialists give validation to government in general, this is of less concern than the problem of socialists in a position where they have to administer the bourgeois state. Even if socialist politicians try to make laws more tailored to the interests of the workers, the very functioning of the bourgeois state is never really in the interests of the working class. It is not suited to the revolutionary rupture that is required by revolution.

Sometimes socialist politicians even find themselves coming into conflict with workers' interests. Socialists might win a majority in a local council or even a state, becoming responsible for the workers engaged in various public utilities. Say an Enterprise Bargaining Agreement comes up for negotiation, then the socialists face the contradiction of supporting the workers against themselves as employer, while simultaneously being responsible to the capitalist state for its budgetary expenses! Also as we know, the positive programmes socialists can enact through the bourgeois state are vetoed by capital. These contradictions mean the revolutionary politics of socialists in parliament are hardly sustainable.

But these problems affect more than just the workers' *parties*. Consider how embedded the Australian union movement is with the Australia Labor Party, how much is sacrificed by union leaders attempting to utilise the Party in an inside/outside strategy. The game with the "political" and "industrial" arms has ultimately meant sacrificing the 'industrial' to the 'political.' Today's ALP is dominated by the interests of certain sections of Australian capital and administered by a layer of middle-class professionals, union and state bureaucrats and professional politicians straight from university.

The exceeding ‘political’ focus today’s union movement to address the needs of the Australian workers is a tribute to the disorganisation of the class. Union leadership consistently sells us the line that what is needed is to get progressives elected, who will change the law and *then* we can take industrial action. This logic is at essence, the real problem.

The working class needs the capacity to act independently and militantly. When half of your strategy relies on ‘boxing smart’ with the capitalist state you are limited to working within a framework of legal reforms, on the need to have a soapbox in parliament. This is why, instead of building campaigns to ‘break the rules’, forcing the laws to change to our needs, we have only seen the Australian Council of Trade Unions seriously mobilise to ‘Change the Rules’, effectively a sly ALP election campaign.

Cancelling workplace action because it runs the risk of upsetting the political balance, or channeling action into parliamentary ends is a deadly problem in the workers movement. Accepting limitations to our demands and what we can fight to win is a defeatist logic. This is a strong part of why anarchists refuse to legitimise the bourgeois state. The way we fight as a class should never be limited by the ballot box.

Going even further than the limitation of strikes, we see that as parliament is utilised by socialists, their everyday practice becomes more and more based upon the impossibility of an insurrection, on ‘correcting’ the nature of bourgeois democracy rather than seeking to abolish it. Proletarian politics becomes more and more bourgeois, catering to the interests of the multi-class ‘citizen’ rather than the proletarian producer.

Effectively, socialists in parliament are not a clever ‘foothold in parliament for workers’ but a foothold of the capitalist state in the workers’ movement. Tools that workers can use to struggle; protests, boycotts, strikes and insurrections are valid. Participating in parliament is not comparable to

these forms of struggle, we do not want to live in bourgeois society, we intend to destroy it.

Making parliamentary seats, even temporarily, a core part of socialist strategy, conditions the struggle in a manner that ensures it is always a constant priority. Once a seat is won, it must be defended, even at the expense of the party’s politics. Socialist politics should remain focused on the class at the place we know has the potential to remake society; workers at the point of production.

Comrades may protest that not participating in parliament leaves the field open for reactionary, bourgeois politicians. That anarchists are suggesting we ignore ‘politics’ altogether. But this is wrong. To anarchists, political rights must be fought for, or defended, by means of mass direct action. Paraphrasing Malatesta “the way in which reforms are achieved is as important as the fact they are achieved at all.” Again, that is the forms that workers employ in their struggle are dialectically linked to the content of those struggles, contributing to the development of revolutionary consciousness.

How do we fight instead?

Anarchism suggests we should always aim to force a crisis in capitalist production and the functioning of its institutions, exacerbating the contradictions towards a revolutionary break.

We achieve reforms by our struggle outside of parliament because the working class has the power to enact them. Because workers are also able to defend it in everyday life, or else legal reforms remain a dead letter. All the progressive laws in the world mean nothing if they are not an active, enforced part of working class life and culture. As the saying goes “you can’t win in court (or parliament) what you can’t hold on the shop floor.”